WITHOUT CAPITAL LETTERS WITHOUT PERIODS

BY ALBA PRATALIA

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scene 1: the bar at opening

interior, dive bar 9:55 a m neon signs still flicker from the night before it smells like bleach, cigarettes, and lost hope a bell rings as the door opens

barman (cleaning a glass):
hey mike, didn't find anyone willing to kill you this morning either, eh?

mike (gruff, coat still wet from the rain):
you figure? since i'm here no need to tease

barman (nods, sets glass down):
fair enough first one's on the house

mike:
about time also, you still got a land line?

barman (snorts):
you kidding? what is this, '98? no, why?

mike (sits, lights a cigarette like laws don't apply to him):
someone told me there's this number you call then a girl crawls out of a *videocassette* and kills you i don't know might be worth a shot

standby drinker (hipster with thick glasses and a half-finished oat milk stout):
wait—*videocassette? land line?* what's that, like an nft or something?

the jukebox, unprovoked, starts playing something that sounds like dial-up static and slow jazz

barman (to standby drinker):
it's what we had before the algorithm decided who we are

mike (to no one in particular):
back then, if you wanted to die, you had to earn it now you just download an app and hope for malware

the door creaks again a teenage girl walks in, soaked, holding a vhs tape her eyes are hollow her voice, vhs-static

girl:
which one of you assholes asked for her?

silence the jukebox short-circuits a cockroach dies on its back behind the counter mike takes a sip

mike:
well looks like *this* one's on me

the ring girl (crosses arms, dripping wet, irritated like a dmv clerk at 4:59 pm):
fellas, please just—*please*—get this and write it down send it to your little group chats, your tiktoks, your whatever's replacing consciousness these days

(she points a soggy finger at the bar)
i am *retired*

(silence)

i live off my pension by the beach
—i mean, there's a beach *view*
—well *almost*
—okay, fine there's a *beach vibe*, if you count the broken fan and the faded "margaritaville" sign

she pulls out a soggy pamphlet: "florida-adjacent real estate for the formerly cursed"

ring girl:
i do yoga i drink rosé from a box i binge reality shows where people pretend to cook and scream at each other

(points at mike)
you think i want to crawl out of cathode-ray tubes for *you*? you smell like wet regret and expired alimony

mike (shrugs):
so… you're not gonna kill me?

ring girl:
do i look like i want a lawsuit?

standby drinker (googling "cathode-ray" on his phone):
so, like you're, like, a ghost with boundaries?

ring girl:
i'm a *woman* with boundaries get it right

barman:
well, shit guess i owe mike that drink after all

ring girl (heading to the door, muttering):
next time you wanna die dramatically, try crossing traffic during rush hour

she vanishes into the daylight like a soggy myth with rent control

mike (squinting, low-voiced):
maybe i should try with the boogeyman

barman (nods toward the darkest corner booth):
he's sitting right there goes by the name brenda these days

mike turns slowly in the booth: a drag queen in terminal decay leg hair rebelliously poking through torn fishnet stockings two silicone lumps sit like unloved cantaloupes on an ironing board of a chest a 3-day beard frames a face that's seen too many horror franchises the wig is on the table it's smoking

brenda (formerly the boogeyman):
i identify as a *weeping fig* now

mike (hesitates):
is that a metaphor or…?

brenda:
no, darling ficus benjamina look it up i only kill if overwatered

barman (wiping a glass that somehow got dirtier):
he's… going through a *photosynthesis phase*

standby drinker (still googling):
wait so like… they/them/tree?

brenda:
photosynth-they, thank you

she picks up a leaf and dabs her mascara

mike (to the barman):
this place got weird

barman:
only before noon

brenda stretches, one boob squeaks like an old boot

brenda:
if you're still suicidal by happy hour, come back i might feel chlorophyllic

suddenly, the barman goes full jazz hands he's juggling shot glasses he's whistling sousa marches he's moonwalking with a broom

barman (too cheerful):
so mike! mike-mike-miiiike! tell me again about that *rash* you had last summer the one that looked like italy? fascinating stuff!

mike (blinking):
what the hell's wrong with you?

barman (nervous grin, sweating whiskey):
wrong? *wrong?* nothing's wrong, everything's right! just me, you, and this deeply personal conversation about your bowel movements!

mike narrows his eyes slowly turns the bell above the door jingles like the devil farted he sees them

freddy krueger and pennywise—walking in hand in hand like newlyweds at a county fair they're wearing *matching christmas jumpers* one says

"*slashing through the snow*", the other "*floating together since 1984*" they're giggling giggling and sharing soft, tender lip kisses freddy's blades trace hearts in the air pennywise's nose *honks* affectionately

mike (throwing his head back, groaning):
oh *come oooon*…

the two horrors see him, wave adorably

pennywise (squealing):
mikeyyyy! look who just got *back from couples therapy*!

freddy (stroking pennywise's hair):
we're not toxic anymore, bro we communicate we journal we even got a shared calendar

mike (dead-eyed):
you were *literally* my backup plan a *and* b

pennywise:
we don't kill anymore we do *trust falls*

freddy:
we're in love and *booked* now we just spook bachelorette parties on halloween paid in venmo and tears

mike (to the barman):
is *everyone* in this town emotionally well-adjusted now?

barman (guiltily):
brenda's seeing a bonsai therapist i'm in a support group for repressed necromancers it's tuesdays

mike (rubbing his temples):
i'm surrounded by retired murderers, mentally stable psychos, and a gender-fluid ficus kill me

brenda (off-screen, watering herself):
still not till happy hour, darling

scene: mike's car, midnight

mike drives erratically down the interstate, one eye half-closed, one hand clutching a near-empty hip

flask, the other swerving between lanes like he's playing mario kart on a suicide setting

mike (slurring to himself):
alright… freddy's soft… penny's in love… brenda's a ficus… no one kills anymore! what the hell happened to *america*?

he squints at a road sign glowing in the fog like divine intervention through whiskey vision

bates motel – vacancy

mike (eyes lighting up):
oh hell yes stabby showers and passive-aggressive taxidermy? *come to papa*

he veers off the road, tires screeching like a scream queen in act two pulls into the gravel lot thunder rolls a neon "vacancy" buzzes like it's waiting to snap

int bates motel – front desk

the bell rings a clean-cut, oddly serene norman bates appears—now wearing linen pants, a turquoise crystal pendant, and a man bun

norman (smiling like enlightenment itself):
welcome, traveler would you like a private room…
or to join the group aura healing retreat?

mike (squinting):
is this… is this the killing place? with the knives and the mummy and the screaming?

norman (gently):
mother and i don't do that anymore we *realigned*
we host *chakra-immersive weekends*
—he gestures toward a brochure: "release your inner violence through guided breathwork "

a bell rings "mother" enters: a 70-something in a shawl and yoga pants, radiating tantric peace and faint patchouli

mother:
namaste, sweetheart you seem emotionally congested would you like a cleansing yoni steam?

mike (backing up):
no no-no-no i was promised a *stabby death in the shower*, not a *lavender colon flush*

norman:
oh, we still use showers—*for rebirth symbolism*

mike (bolts for the door):
you people are sick

mother (calling after him):
we have a 3-for-1 coupon if you bring your inner child!

mike (already peeling out of the lot):
i *killed* my inner child with gin in 2009!

as mike tears down the highway in existential despair and mild dui, the world goes monochrome a cold wind howls a rotund figure in a black suit

materializes in the passenger seat, calmly folding his hands over a perfectly round belly

alfred hitchcock (dry, nasal):
why don't you just kill yourself, then?

mike (without swerving):
think i haven't *tried*?

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scene 1: the gun

mike, in a dusty motel room, gun to his temple
dramatic silence finger pulls trigger click

cut to: bullet politely falls out the opposite side of the revolver, rolls under the bed

hitchcock (offscreen):
the suspense is disappointing

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scene 2: the fork and the socket

mike, now bare-foot and wild-eyed, jam-packed fork aimed at wall socket sparks—then blackout

he blinks entire room dead tries again—fuse box blows neighborhood blackout

one more try: this time, a majestic hum—followed by the entire city plunging into darkness sirens howl grid offline mike, lit by one last flickering candle

hitchcock (sipping tea in corner):
you're not suicidal you're an eco-terrorist

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scene 3: the gas oven

mike kneels solemnly, head in the oven, classic sylvia plath-style

he breathes in deeply… pauses… sniffs again…

emerges, blinking hair suddenly curled face glows

mike:
is that… *lavender cologne?*

cue commercial jingle: "new from glade: eternal sleep "

hitchcock:
the only gas you're cooking is *character development*

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scene 4: the bridge

mike jumps from a high steel bridge in glorious slow motion the wind whistles, strings swell

he plummets toward icy death… only to land on a barge filled with oversized bags labeled "feathers for pillows "

pillows burst open around him like a snow globe of failure

captain of the barge looks up, unbothered

captain:
you owe me for the merchandise

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back to the car

mike (furious):
i am *literally unkillable* i've tried poison, tigers, nuns with grudges—*nothing works*!

hitchcock (smug):
then perhaps the real horror… is *living*

scene: back on the highway – 3:22 a m
scene: mike's rock-bottom highway revelation
a literal cartoon lightbulb flicks on above his head, buzzing like it's powered by irony and bourbon

mike (eyes wide, whispering):
eureka

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montage: “the rise of mike”
cue ridiculous 80s synth-pop

– mike starts a revolutionary business selling *emotionally supportive ai toasters* (tagline: “they know when you’re feeling crumby”)
– ipo explodes billionaire overnight
– marries a scandinavian top model who only reads *proust* and bench-presses motorcycles
– has two kids who speak six languages and file taxes for fun
– also has two lovers: one acrobat, one astrophysicist, both dangerously unhinged in bed
– drives fast cars, owns private jets, hosts dinner parties where nobel prize winners and porn stars argue about camus
– he’s happy he’s fulfilled he’s obnoxiously glowing
he has *everything*

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scene: mike's mega-mansion, sunset doorbell rings

mike, in silk robe and smugness, opens the door death stands there, same black cloak, same bony attitude, holding the scythe like it's his old tennis racket

death (grumbling):
ok ok, you win, mr smarty pants no need to smirk

mike smirks anyway with champagne in hand he knew this was coming

mike (with glee):
loophole achieved

he steps out gleefully, no fear, no regrets—just victory

death (sighs):
yeah, yeah come on walk this way

mike (mocking, arms swaying, hips swinging, mimicking death's slow bony shuffle):
i thought you'd never ask

they stroll off together into the afterlife sunset behind them, the world's most perfect life collapses like a sandcastle in a tsunami

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narrator (in the voice of someone who smokes existential dread):
he cracked the code not by ending misery but by triggering cosmic spite

moral:
when you truly *don't want* to die, that's when death shows up
mike just gamed the universe

somewhere between a dive bar jukebox playing dial-up tones and a cathode-ray suicide hotline, mike is trying to die

not metaphorically
not dramatically
just inconveniently and repeatedly

he's tried cursed videotapes
he's tried ghosts with menopause
he's tried the boogeyman in drag and the bates motel with chakra retreats
he's tried electrocution, gas ovens, bridges, even love

nothing works
not because he’s special
but because everyone else retired

the killers found therapists
the horrors got hobbies
and death, well, death’s got an appointment problem

this is not a book about hope
this is a book about spite
a book where failure wears fishnets
where suicide meets gig economy etiquette
where the universe delays you not out of cruelty
but pure bureaucratic indifference

it’s also funny
like, disturbingly funny
like, you’ll-laugh-then-question-your-life funny

so go ahead
open it
call the number
play the tape
and remember:
even death needs boundaries now